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Playground Lost: Television, Video and Chinese American Children's Imaginative Play

Since the introduction of the mass media, their content has been a rich vein from which children mine ideas for play. Television/video transformation play, the most common form of media-related play facilitates the child's development of creativity, intellectual growth, acquisition of social skills, reduction of egocentricity and building of peer cultures. Through ethnography, this study examines the role of American television and video in Chinese American children's culture of play and peer interaction. For comparison purpose, White children were also included in the study. Both White and Chinese children had access to similar media, yet they used media information very differently in their play. One possible explanation could be the quantitative and qualitative under-representation of Chinese characters in American media. This type of media representation provides no role models for Chinese children in their play and offers no inspirations for White children to include Chinese characters when creating media-related play. This article calls for the media industry to re-examine their role in children's socialization process, i.e. learning through play.

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In the United States, one of the characteristics that will help define the 21st century is the increasingly diverse population. For example, the Asian American population in the US "increased by 140 percent from 1970 to 1980 and then by 108 percent from 1980 and 1990 (to a total of approximately 7,273,662), making it the fastest growing segment of the US population" (Chan & Hune, 1995:218). Based on Workforce 2000 and other similar reports, by the year 2020, the now so-called "ethnic minority" would be the majority (Petrini, 1989; Duke, 1991). This also means minority children today will be the primary driving force of the American society in the years 2020 and beyond. With that prediction in mind, how children, especially ethnic minority children, today are socialized within this drastically changing environment has

strong implications for the future development of American society.

Traditionally, family and educational institutions have been recognized as two primary socialization agents for children. In today's world, with the ubiquitous availability of communication technologies, the mass media, for better or worse, are now also seen by many as one of the primary socialization agents for our children. This study explores the role of American mass media in the socialization process of Chinese American children. It focuses on meanings these children derive from television and video as reflected in themes from their play.

Play is an important element in the socialization process of young children. Mergen (1982) argued that study of children's play is essential because "we turn to childhood, as we turn to the past, for explanations of what we are today" (p. 128). Childhood is the time when we "acquire language, learn sex roles and develop fundamental beliefs" (p. 128). As Pepler and Rubin (1982) suggested, early learning experience is most successful through children's self-discovery and play with others, not through direct teaching forced upon a child. Many studies have concluded that play aids children's development of creativity, aesthetic appreciation, self-concept, ethnic identity and mastery of activities useful in their adulthood (Denzin, 1975; Garcia & Hurtado, 1995). Based on Piaget (1952), children are capable of playing make-believe games from approximately the age of two and this play phenomenon becomes increasingly prevalent throughout the pre-school years. Those make-believe games include three general types of play: daydreaming, imaginary playmate(s) and transformation play (Lefrancois, 1986).

Daydreaming is imagining without physical activity. The imaginary playmate is private play that does not require participation of others in the game. Transformation is the process of altering objects, time, situations and roles mentally through pretending. It is mostly a group activity, though it can also be done alone (Kostelnik, 1986). Children often group together for transformation play, in which each child will pretend to be either a thing or a person other than him/herself. This type of play provides children a chance to view things from someone else's perspective. It also offers them opportunities to safely express their emotions. In addition, it gives children the necessary time and space to work out fears, practice what they learn "about the world, act out fantasies or relive a particularly important experience" ("Learning through play," 1994:23).

Literature Review - Play And Socialisation

Furthermore, group transformation play is especially important in the creation of peer cultures. Social development is more than a child's private internalization process of adults' skills and knowledge. Childhood socialization is also a social and collective process. As Corsaro (1992) stated "children enter into a social nexus and, through interaction with others, establish social understandings that become fundamental social knowledge on which they build continually" (p.161). As a result, a major change occurs in their socialization process when children extend their contact beyond their families. For example, by interacting with playmates through play in day care centers, "children produce the first in a series of peer cultures in which childhood knowledge and practices gradually are transformed into the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the adult world" (Corsaro, 1992:162). This marks a major shift in children's social development because once they realize that "they have the ability to produce their own shared world without direct dependence on adults, the nature of the socialization process itself is transformed" (Corsaro, 1992:162). Consequently, playmates (peers) become as crucial as adults in young children's socialization process.

While play has existed long before the introduction of mass media, mass media have become useful resources in generating an imaginative tendency in children's transformation play (Singer & Singer, 1990; Singer, 1993). Television is especially viewed as "a powerful stimulant towards fantasy and imaginative resourcefulness in the child" (Singer & Singer, 1981:379). The popularity of VCRs also makes video (pre-recorded tapes of television programs and movies) a data bank for children's transformation play. For children, television and video provide the common ground for communication and role construction in group transformation play (Valkenburg et al., 1992; Valkenburg & Van der Voort, 1994; Valkenburg & Van der Voort, 1995). Some studies have found that such type of group play is constructed mostly around the television characters but not the programming content. James and McCain (1982) argued that in group imaginative play, when the content of television programming was incorporated into children's play, the characters of that program were incorporated as well. However, very often television characters were included in the context of children's own story lines. In such instances, program characters are the essence of children's imaginative play (Singer, 1993).

Moreover, superheroes dominate character-related play. Kostelnik (1986) assessed that superhero play allows children to take on a powerful role, providing prestige and control unavailable in children's daily experiences. Such play, therefore, helps children

build self-esteem at a time when they are grappling with real-life developmental challenges. In addition, superhero play helps guide children's development of moral judgement. Because characters in superhero stories are portrayed as either strictly evil or completely good, children can explore morals and values in a context that is less complex than the real world, in which people's behavior is far more ambiguous.

The implication of positive and powerful television and video characters in children's play, therefore, cannot be overlooked. The issue is especially important in the case of ethnic minority children.

Many studies have suggested that ethnic minority children are much heavier media users than are their White counterparts. Also, young minority children tend to identify with characters of like ethnicity as their role models, but the mass media underrepresent ethnic minorities both quantitatively and qualitatively (Allen & Clarke, 1980; Blosser, 1988; Dorr, 1982; Greenberg, 1976; Greenberg, 1980; Greenberg & Brand, 1993; Greenfield & Beagles-Ross, 1988; Morris, 1982; Powell, 1982; Reeves & Greenberg, 1978; Supervi-Velez, 1986; Spurlock, 1982; Takanishi, 1982; Tedesco, 1974; Zuckerman et al., 1980). In other words, in the United States, there are very few minority characters in children's books, television programs and video tapes for minority children to model after, identify with and transform into in their imaginative play.

Take children's books for example. Many of the popular ones in the United States are criticized for being "racist, sexist and elitist, and the image of Asian Americans they represent is grossly misleading" (Chambers, 1983:100). Though young children today watch more television programs and video tapes than read books, a large majority of TV and video programming is based on popular children's books, mostly classic fairy tales ("Big names top," 1997). However, as Chambers (1983) stated:

"The best known of these [classic fairy tales] are European and reflect cultural and economic values and attitudes of White, Western peoples. Western societies have undergone substantial changes since these tales were recorded but societal values and beliefs have not changed appreciably. By repeating the tales to children at their most impressionable age we reinforce attitudes and values that are at best, obsolete and, more importantly, in a multicultural society like ours, dysfunctional" (p.92).

Occasionally, non-white characters are the focus of a story. For example, *The Five Chinese Brothers* (Bishop & Wiese, 1938) is a good example. While it has been "one of the most widely

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circulated children's books in the United States," unfortunately the book epitomizes "the flagrant stereotype" and racist views against Chinese (Chambers, 1983:96).

One can easily find similarly negative representations of ethnic minorities on television programs and movies. As Woll (1988:16) pointed out: "When one considers the history of the depiction of ethnic and racial groups within motion pictures, one sees almost a century of abuse in this regard. From the dawn of films virtually all ethnic groups have been stereotyped on the screen".

For example, with few exceptions, Chinese have always been cast in minor roles as cooks, laundry men/women, servants and poor laborers. This portrait is a direct contradiction of today's reality in the United States (Leong, 1991; Nakayama, 1994). This trend of negative depiction continues even into the 1990s, supposedly the age of political correctness. Sadly, "we all have the impression things are improving, but they are not" ("Women, minorities on," 1993:21A). For instance, a Chinese finally was cast in the successful TV sitcom *Seinfeld*, but only as a food delivery man who was an accident victim ("90s TV is," 1992:7D). The recent blockbuster, *Lethal Weapon 4* (released in the United States on 10 July, 1998) portrayed Chinese as evil gangsters who had no regards for human lives and were superior in Chinese *kungfu* (even Mel Gibson was defeated by them time after time until right before the end of the movie, of course).

Even *Mulan*, the first Disney animated movie featuring a Chinese story (released in the States on 19 June, 1998), was regrettably accompanied by stereotyped media coverage. Based on an ancient Chinese legend dated more than 1500 years ago, *Mulan* disguised herself as a man to take her ailing father's place in the Chinese army to defeat the invading Huns. The principle of filial piety, the preservation of family honor, the devotion to one's country and the enormous personal sacrifice for the greater good of the society are the messages behind this story that all children in Chinese societies grow up with (Seno, 1998).

While Disney's *Mulan* stays true to the story (without emphasizing those messages, though), much of the media coverage was not (Chang, 1998). Most coverage praised the movie's beautiful artwork and successful marketing (see for example, Spelling, 1998; Rosen, 1998; Paxman, 1998; Pinsker, 1998); a few remembered to mention the heroic nature of *Mulan*, the character (see for example, Murray & Ringel, 1998; Johnson, 1998).

However, some completely misinterpreted the story. For example, one report explained *Mulan* as "a film about a girl pretends to be a boy" (Hindes, 1998:71). Several described *Mulan*, the character, as "a cross-dresser" (Gliatto & Rozen, 1998:31; Karon

& Klady, 1998:117). Therefore, even when finally there are Disney ethnic characters available for Chinese as well as all children in a multicultural society to model after or transform into in their imaginative play, the heroine in the movie is called by some as a cross-dresser. This type of labelling might misinform some parents who in turn may not want any *Mulan* characters to be a part of their children's playground experience.

This quantitative and qualitative media under representation also has another ramification on young children. Based on Piaget (1952), two cognitive structures characterize pre-schoolers (three- to five-year olds who are in the pre-operational stage of their cognitive development). One is perceptual boundedness, the tendency of children to focus on and respond to aspects existing in their immediate perceived environment. The other is centration, the tendency to focus on a limited amount of information available (Zigler & Child, 1969).

In processing a stimulus such as a television program, the pre-operational child would be expected to focus on only a few dimensions (centration). Furthermore, perceptual boundedness would limit the child to focus on visual and audio aspects rather than on content or message aspects of any stimuli.

Therefore, to pre-school ethnic minority children, fairies, princesses, princes and heroes on American television and video are all very different looking from how they visualize themselves. To them, for a reason they may not understand, it is always the "White" *Thundercats*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *He-Man* and *She-Ra* who rescue the planet and only the "white" Cinderella who finally wins the prince's heart. Many argue such a perception has a negative impact on ethnic minority children's ethnic identity and greatly influences their development in later life (Spurlock, 1982; Takanishi, 1982; Powell, 1982; Garcia & Hurtado, 1995).

Unfortunately, this negative impact may not be limited to ethnic minority children in America. Hollywood productions have successfully penetrated entertainment markets on a global scale. Unless their local programming is vigorously counteracting Hollywood's unicultural portrayals of the world, ethnic minority children in countries with White people as the majority could experience the similar media exposure as do the ethnic children in the States.

In summary, even at the dawn of the 21st century, American television and video have created a milieu devoid of ethnic minority images, where through media transformation play and other activities children negotiate and develop the meanings of self and life.

Even though the implications of this media milieu are international in scope, time and space constraints confine this

Methodology: Participants

study to examine only the American scene. Because Chinese are among the fastest growing population segments in the US and have the least favorable portrayal in American media (Chan and Hune, 1995; Leong, 1991; Nakayama, 1994; "Women, minorities on," 1993), this paper explores the role of American television and video in Chinese American children's culture of play and peer interaction. It attempts to answer the research question of "what meanings do American television and video provide for Chinese American children and what use do they make of them through their imaginative play?"

For the purpose of this study, the term Chinese American children refers to children of Chinese ancestry who are growing up in the US and were born either in America or elsewhere.

This study targets children between the ages of three and five because they are among the heaviest media consumers in the United States and they have the strongest tendency to engage in imaginative play (Singer, 1993).

An ethnographic study was conducted with 50 children within this age group at a day care center. Among these children, 20 of them were from ethnic minority groups, including one Native American girl, one Afro-American boy, three Chinese American girls, seven Chinese American boys, one Korean American girl, two Korean American boys, two Japanese American girls, two Japanese American boys and two Arab American boys.

In order to study the Chinese American children in context, all children who enrolled in this day care center (referred to as the Center hereafter) full time for at least one semester during September, 1991 to December, 1994 were participants of this ethnography. Most of the 50 children attended this Center for two to three years. During the first year of the study, there were only three Chinese American children (one girl and two boys). In the second year, the Chinese girl left, but six new Chinese (two girls and four boys) entered. In the third year, one Chinese boy left but his younger brother joined the class. Overall, during this study, about 30 three- to five-year olds registered in the Center each semester. Roughly one-third of them were ethnic minorities. Except for the first year, Chinese American children were numerically the dominant minority group.

It is important to note that all ten Chinese children were bilingual. All three girls were born in the States and spoke English just like their White counterparts. Three of the seven boys joined the Center after they had been in the US for only a few months. Their English was not as fluent as that of the three girls' or the other four boys' who had been in the States for a long time

(relatively speaking for a three-year-old). However, after one semester, those three boys could converse in English fluently to their non-Chinese classmates.

Because of their circular logic, young children in many ways are more difficult to study than adults. For example, though direct interview (used along or imbedded in other research designs) is a commonly used data gathering method, it almost always guarantees failure when used with young children (Patton, 1990). Takanishi (1982) called for a more "interpretative analysis" to assess "meanings of the content to children ... in relation to their personal and cultural experiences" (pp.82, 86). Corsaro (1990) also emphasized this approach and advocated "the importance of studying socialization experiences from the children's perspective by directly entering their everyday worlds" (p.207).

In this sense, the best way to study children's play is through ethnography — by watching them play and by playing with them. Ethnography aims to "learn about a world by encountering it first hand" (Agar, 1986:12). Therefore, it involves long-term association with participants of studies in their own territory. This approach allows observations, understandings and interpretations to emerge as the fieldwork progresses. New insights and revelations are allowed to unfold naturally from within the context. All findings are, therefore, "grounded" in the data from the field (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Following this "grounded theory approach," I started this ethnography in September, 1991, with only a general idea of wanting to study children and how they use television and video information. I let the fieldwork guide my study focus. During the initial six months, the Chinese American children's use (or lack of use) of television and video information in their imaginative play gradually unfolded and finally emerged as the focus of the study. Therefore, the official data gathering only began in February, 1992. The first six months were built in also as an acclimatisation period for children, their parents, and day care teachers to get accustomed to my presence and for me to get to know them.

In order to make the study as natural as possible, I became one of the volunteer teacher-assistants in the day care center. The Center's staff understood my dual intentions: to actually help out with the children and also gather information for the study. In addition, a newsletter was sent to all parents about my coming to the Center. On average, I spent 15 to 20 hours each week in the Center during the first three and a half years of the study (September, 1991 to December, 1994). I gradually decreased the hours in 1995 to five to ten hours a week and ended the project in spring, 1996. The main task during the final 15 months of the field work was to cross validate my observations with the newly

enrolled. These subject-triangulation is especially important, because an ethnographer has the inherent powers and weakness of the human mind. Being a Chinese American myself, I was aware of the potential cultural baggage I might bring to the study. It was thus imperative for me to repeatedly cross check my observations and conclusions against different children throughout the nearly five-year span of my field work. I also constantly engaged in source-triangulation with children's parents and other teachers at the Center.

At the Center, I performed my duty as a teacher-assistant: watch children play and play with them. I discussed my daily observations with parents when they came to pick up their children and I also asked for their opinions and inputs. I often stayed late to close up the Center with the head teacher, who had been with the Center for more than 10 years. During that time, we shared with each other our daily observations and conclusions. Moreover, I acquired from her much background information about many children here, which helps contextualize my interpretation of their behaviors at the Center.

The children's day at the Center moved along a set of daily routines. Starting with the "outside time" (free play in the playground), they then went inside for the "snack time." Then came the "circle time" (for activities such as story reading and show-and-tell). Afterwards, children could choose whatever they would like to do for "activity time." Available activities included playing outside or inside with Play-Doh, Legos, blocks, artwork, writing/drawing, puzzles or housekeeping. Then they had lunch and a nap.

The day continued again with the same routine: outside, snack, circle and activity until the Center closed. The day's routines were guided by the head teacher, one of several regular teachers, and two or three teacher- assistants.

In addition to daily fieldnotes on observations, interviews, interactions and reflections, I gathered all forms of field documents every day. Mostly, they consisted of artwork and story books children made and gave me. And from time to time, parents would share pictures and video tapes with me, showing their family activities and the play of their children at home. All data sources were triangulated to arrive at the findings.

Generally, there were minimal differences in media use, in terms of frequency and types, among children in the Center. Because they all had the same daily routine, they could only watch television during weeknights and weekends. Consequently they all had the same program repertoire provided by their TV market.

Findings: Media Use

Even with VCRs and pre-recorded tapes, many children had almost the same titles. In addition, many parents swapped tapes or shared baby-sitting duties, resulting in one child's tapes being viewed by many of his/her classmates. Thus, very little discrepancy can be identified in terms of programs watched. The most popular television and video with these children at the time of this study were: *Thundercats*, *He-Man*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Land Before Time*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Dick Tracy*, *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Care Bears*, *Batman*, *Peter Pan*, *Captain Planet*, *Superman*, *Spinderman*, *Flinstones*, *Simpsons*, *Robin Hood*, *G.I. Joe*, *My Little Pony*, and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. Only eight out of these 20 titles were produced after these children were born. The rest were re-runs or video releases of old TV programs and movies.

At the Center, we read books to the children every day. While they all had some books at home, it was customary to swap books as well. In other words, little difference in their choice of books could be observed. However, ethnic minority children did have additional media material. For example, the Chinese children also read Chinese tales, such as *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*. The story is about the joyful journey and endeavour of eight legendary super beings of the Taoist sect who have lived at various times throughout ancient Chinese dynasties.

In addition, they watched Chinese video tapes, such as *The Allegory of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Pilgrims to the West*. The former is about devotion, sacrifice, fight for justice and struggle for power and stability during the Three-Kingdom Era in the third century China. The latter describes the adventures of 16 years (AD 629 - 645) during which a Buddhist monk and his three disciples travelled to and back from India to acquire valued Buddhist scriptures for China. Both *The Allegory* and *The Pilgrims* are novels based on actual historical events. For centuries, both books have been viewed as among the most popular and respected Chinese classic literature. Now, they have been adopted into Children's books and television cartoons. The cartoons are available on video tapes as well. These Chinese media products were sent by friends and families from Taiwan, China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Malaysia.

When it came to choosing an activity, the majority of the white children preferred activities that involved group play (usually four to eight children in a group). The two most popular ones were "housekeeping" and "playing outside." The Chinese and other ethnic minority children, with the exception of the Afro-

Activity Time

White Children's Transformation Play

American boy, preferred non-group activities. Frequently, they stayed inside at the art table, writing center, Play-Doh table or Legos and blocks areas. Even when they were outside, most of the time they played on the swing, monkey bars or slide, activities one could do alone. When they did group together, it was mostly as a pair or a triad.

During the group play, the White children and the Afro-American boy engaged in an array of imaginative play using characters from media, mainly television and movies. The head teacher estimated that they used media-related themes in their play as much as sixty percent of the time. On the contrary, perhaps only one percent of the time such conclusion could be drawn about Chinese and other ethnic minority children's imaginative play.

In order to provide contextual information, samples of the white and the Afro-American children's media-related play would be presented here, even though only on one occasion did a Chinese child engage in these media plays. Three categories of play were derived based on how children used the media information. They were simple transformation, complex transformation and indirect transformation.

Simple transformation involves assuming the identity of a particular character and announcing it or playing with it without a story plot. For example, a little boy came to the Center one day wearing a red *Superman* cape, emblazoned with a bold yellow "S" on the back. As he sat down for the "snack time," he announced to other children at the table, "I'm Superman." One girl then responded, "Hey, Superman, could you pass the milk, pretty please?" He replied with a self-assured tone and deep voice, "Why, of course!" For the next twenty minutes, other children addressed him as "*Superman*."

It is interesting to note that this particular boy was the youngest and the smallest in his class during that semester. When he was not the "*Superman*," he spoke with a somewhat shy and soft voice.

Girls played simple transformation as well. For instance, a group of three White girls ran around in circles with their arms stretched out, singing loudly the *Batman* instrumental theme but using the word "*Batgirl*" at the end. Another time, four girls were using the slide. One said, "It's your turn now, 'Dick Tracy's Wife.'" "Good, good. I'm coming, *Batgirl*!" They addressed each other as media or media-inspired characters the entire time while they used the slide. The other two girls were *Cat Woman* and "*Dick Tracy's* wife's twin sister," respectively.

I later told them I didn't remember *Dick Tracy* had a wife and I hadn't seen any *Batgirl* on TV or movie (the particular *Batman* movie that introduced the *Batgirl* character came out in 1997, long after the field work was completed). One girl explained, "But he is a man and I am not. So, I should just be Dick Tracy's wife." The logic for creating "*Batgirl*" was the same. The "*Batgirl*" laughed at me and reasoned, "Don't be silly. Batman is a man. For us, we have to be Batgirls." As for "Dick Tracy's wife's twin sister," they said they couldn't think of another female character at that moment, so it was easy to just have a twin sister.

Apparently, television programs, movies and video tapes not only provide characters for children in their play, but also inspire them to create characters that are equally powerful or admirable to suit their needs. Complex transformation is simply transformation with a substantial story plot. For example, seven children (two white boys, four white girls and one Chinese girl) engaged in a play, placing various television and movie characters in a sophisticated story line.

During one "outside time" in the big sandbox, perhaps tired of just playing sand, one girl looked at the others and said, "Hey, wanna play Aladdin?" One boy answered, "Yeah, let's play. Let's play." The girl began to orchestrate the play. She assigned herself as Jasmine (the princess from *Aladdin*) and the other white girls were Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*), Belle (from *Beauty and the Beast*) and Jasmine's twin sister (a media-inspired character. Jasmine in *Aladdin* has no sister). One boy was *Robin Hood*; the other was *Batman*. Then the Chinese girl queried what she should be. Jasmine answered, "how about Rajah" (Jasmine's tiger). "Come, Rajah, let's go to the garden," She then said. So the Chinese girl went down on her knees and hands and started walking on her "four legs," following Jasmine around in the sandbox.

In their story, it was the Thanksgiving holiday season. Many visitors were to descend upon their castle and all of them were busy cooking (they also transformed sand and plastic wares in the sandbox into all the kitchen utensil characters in *Beauty and the Beast*). Then Belle shouted, "we still have to cook a thousand dishes!" Robin Hood replied, "I will go find Maid Marian" (the heroine in *Robin Hood*). He left the sandbox and returned in about 20 seconds (without Maid Marian) and shouted "Ursula is coming!" (She is the evil sea witch in *The Little Mermaid*). I think seeing some children play with various *The Little Mermaid* figurines on the other side of the playground gave him the idea. Then, suddenly, all of them began making weapons. By this time (about 5 minutes into the play), the Chinese girl declared, "I am tired; I don't want to be Rajah." She left the sandbox and went inside. The story went on without Rajah and a variety of monsters were

supposedly approaching (though none was assigned to play monsters, they just spoke about them). Two boys outside the sandbox joined as *Superman* and *Captain Planet* to help defend the castle. After another 20 minutes, one said "I'm thirsty." Others agreed, "Me too." The play ended abruptly. Most of them went inside to get something to drink.

While we were inside, I asked the Chinese girl why she left the play. She replied, "I don't want to be Rajah. A tiger is not allowed to cook and I am supposed to walk around with Jasmine." I probed other girls why the Chinese girl had to be Rajah and why couldn't she be Belle's twin sister (since they created Jasmine's twin sister) or one of Ariel's sisters (Ariel has five sisters in *The Little Mermaid*). Their answers were: "But she is not;" "She cannot;" "Jasmine needs a tiger." Then "Belle" decided to elucidate further by adding, "Belle has shining, long, reddish, golden hair." This statement, perhaps, meant to indicate that the Chinese girl had only short, dark hair and was not suitable to be Belle or her twin sister.

Indirect transformation refers to transforming toys or game pieces into media characters then play them according to the rules of the game. For example, three boys transformed their game pieces into *Power Rangers* in their chess game. The boy with white chess pieces said, "Watch out, here comes my Jason number one." Jason is the white *Power Ranger* in *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. As he advanced by one move, the boy with the red chess pieces replied, "but you know my Red Ranger number one is very super, too." The boy with the black chess pieces assigned his chess as the *Black Ranger* and proceeded with his move. This type of indirect transformation was also observed in other competitive games, where different game pieces were named as Raphael, Leonardo, Donatello and Michaelangelo. These characters are the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

Interestingly, figurines of both *Turtles* and *Rangers* were banned from the Center, because the head teacher thought they instigated too much "out-of-control play." However, the above mentioned instances demonstrate how inventive these children were. They knew how to gratify their desires without breaking the rules.

In contrast to the high frequency of media-facilitated imaginative play among the White children, 99 percent of the time, the Chinese children (all other Asian children as well) did not engage in any form of media transformation in their play. Popular American media characters seemed to be totally absent in Chinese children's imaginative play. Nevertheless, four very

Chinese Children's Fantasy Themes

interesting themes emerged from stories they told, pictures they drew, Play-Doh creations they made, and structures they built from Legos and blocks.

I. The Non-Human Kingdom

Many times when the Chinese children created something to play with, their creations did not involve any human characters. In comparison, white children often involved one of the TV/video figures or themselves as characters in their creation.

For example, two Chinese boys always drew pictures about elephants, dinosaurs, monsters, walking refrigerators, etc., but never a human character of any kind. Even when creating things from Play-Doh or other materials at the art center, one boy made airplanes with an elephant as a pilot and dinosaurs riding on top of the plane. Here is a sample story he told while working on the art table: "This is an elephant airplane. It is flying to Taiwan, Guangdong, to do business. A big piece of rock falls down from the top of the mountain and hits the elephant plane. The plane drops to the bottom of the mountain."

Here is another prototype sample:

"The elephant/dinosaur/tigers/*Dumbos*...etc. are going to the forest/sliding valley/deep sea/beautiful village...etc. because there is food there. And they want to eat." (*Note: Compiled from several stories from four different boys with the same theme but different animals and locations.*)

Dumbo is an elephant character from both a cartoon series and a children's book. Here is a rare incident that a media character was used in Chinese children's imaginative play at the Center. However, it was still an animal and not a human character.

When the subject was not animals, it was more likely about nature or some kind of man-made technology without human characters. For example, a Chinese girl often drew mountains, stars, moons and suns (emphasized by the girl). Many Chinese boys often drew spaceships, airplanes and trains. When I asked the boys who the pilot or driver was, they all responded "nobody."

Conversely, with the same types of drawings, the white children would have themselves or one of their superheroes as the pilot. To show what type of story books white children made, here are some titles of their stories: "I travel in space," "I play in the park," "I'm the Superman," "Call me Dick Tracy," "Batman has chicken pox," "Mommy and new baby," "Lines and nothing else."

II. Family: Center of their Imaginative World

In their play activities, whatever they were building, making or drawing, "family" always seemed to be a part of it, a factor not nearly as pervasive among white children.

For example, one Chinese girl once drew four similar pictures with many line, dots and circles. She asked me to write down the following story for her four-picture story book. Birds are building nests. It's raining and there is thunder and lightning. The mother bird is flying to rescue all her babies. The end.

In another incident, one Chinese boy (the same one who made the elephant airplane) drew three pictures about dinosaurs and elephants. His three-picture story is: "The dinosaur is on the way to a beautiful village. He is going home to his family. It's an elephant. It's a very, very big elephant. He is on his way to attack the hunter. He is big; he can smash the hunter to death just by stepping on him with one leg. He is protecting his whole family, everybody in the family. It's a big elephant, but he is smaller than the other one. He wants to go to sleep. He is very sleepy. He protects his family everyday and never gets to sleep. He protects family; now he needs sleep."

The white children drew pictures with scary themes, too. However, the scary situation often was resolved because "I'm the 'young' Robin Hood," or "I'm Dick Tracy's wife. I solve problems." Animals also appeared in White children's drawings but they certainly weren't going home nor sacrificing sleep to protect their family.

III. Fights and Battles

Also battles and fights seemed to be prominent in Chinese children's fantasy themes. I observed White children with battle themes as well. However, the children themselves were often the "Superman," "Batgirl," and "Captain Planet" who were fighting off monsters or evil forces. In the fighting themes of Chinese children, there were no superhero human characters involved, no good versus evil plots. It consisted simply of the act of fighting.

For example, a Chinese boy said this to me while he was running around in the playground area:

I'm shooting into the sky. See, there are airplanes. (Question: Are you fighting bad guys?). No. I have guns and tanks. I simply have to shoot the airplane.

The next example is from the Play-Doh area with two other Chinese boys. The story was told only by one of them. Again, I was the questioner.

I'm going to bomb your airplane. (Question: Why? Because

I am the bad guy?). Oh, no. You are a good person. You are not the bad guy at all. But I have to bomb you. See, my airplane has to drop bombs. They always do. And I just have to bomb you.

After he finished bombing me, he immediately picked up a piece of Play-Doh and said it was an ambulance coming to rescue me. "But why? You just bombed me." I asked. He replied, "I like you and don't want you to die."

IV. Perception of Others

Finally, the Chinese children seemed to have a distinct perception of others (any different ethnic groups from themselves). Often, such signs seemed to be projected through their conversation and play activities.

However, I did not observe the same phenomenon among White children, except one. A three-year-old told me and the other teachers at different times that he hated "blacks" and did not want to play with them. Otherwise, most comments from the other White children about ethnic minority children were indifferent, such as, "Oh, her name is She is Japanese. She does not talk well (meaning she can't speak English well)." Furthermore, I did not observe any projection upon others from the White children's play activities, while that was not the case with the Chinese children.

Two examples illustrate how some Chinese children reflected upon people different from themselves. In the first case, one boy used self-made Play-Doh figures to tell a story. In the second case, a different boy commented on an Afro-American performer who was a special guest during our activity time.

This is the good dinosaur. He is the greatest. He speaks Chinese and American language. He also knows all sort of languages that Americans don't understand. Here is the bad dinosaur. He speaks like a monster and he speaks American language.

She is so strange. She is weird. I don't know what she is talking about. I don't understand her. She is stupid. That other boy and I just sit there, watching the ceiling, staring at the air. I think she is stupid.

Even though Chinese children rarely incorporated media characters or information in their play at the Center, based on their parents, they did so regularly at home. They used Chinese characters in all three forms of transformation play.

For example, one Chinese girl liked to be *Her Xianggu*, the fairy in *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*. She had no siblings and

**Different
Play At
Home**

engaged mostly in simple and indirect transformation plays using the *Her Xiang* character. She also liked to be princess and empress. But those two characters did not have any specific names. Her mother was not certain whether the princess/empress play was media-inspired.

One Chinese boy often engaged in complex transformation with a neighbor Chinese boy. They pretended to be *Kuan Yu* and *Chuko Liang* (superheroes in *The Allegory of the Three Kingdoms*). Interestingly, this Chinese boy's mother commented that the battle scenes in their play were more like *Batman* and *Robin* than those of *The Allegory*.

Another Chinese boy played both simple and complex transformations with his younger brother (who later attended the Center in the third year of this study). He liked to be the *Heavenly Saint Monkey* (a superhero and a disciple of the monk in *The Pilgrims to the West*). This boy once mentioned his superhero when he saw a White boy give me a drawing entitled "Batman has chicken pox." He remarked, "the Heavenly Saint Monkey is ten thousand times more powerful than Batman, Superman and Spiderman put together. Who wants to be a Batman?" I asked why he didn't play Saint Monkey here at the Center. He responded, "American boys don't know how to play. They are not smart enough to be the Heavenly Saint Monkey."

Discussion

True to the discoveries of past studies, pre-school children do indeed engage in media-related play, drawing sources especially from television and video. This study also reinforces previous research findings that media characters occupy a significant role in children's play.

In addition, children at the Center were quite resourceful in using media characters to their advantages. They combined characters from various programs and movies in one play and often created additional but pertinent characters if necessary. Technologies and media marketing strategies, to an extent, have helped make media information and characters accessible and adaptable to these children.

Many of the characters these children played are from popular television programs which went off the air long before they were born. Yet, through re-run on cable televisions and releases of these programs on video tapes, old programs with their legacy of less complex and diverse societal structures are added into children's program repertoire.

Furthermore, successful television programs in the 1990s, such as *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, are released on video tapes while the programs are still on the air. Meanwhile movies

are produced based on these programs, which subsequently are released on video tapes as well. Similarly, successful movies, such as *Dick Tracy*, *Batman*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*, have been turned into weekly television cartoons. Both movies and TV cartoons are available on video tapes.

In sum, media technologies and media strategists have eliminated time barriers and immortalized both dated and current white characters. What the industry has failed to consider is how to diminish cultural barriers and introduce ethnic characters to reflect the reality of the American society.

The result of this unicultural presentation can be seen through the differences in the Chinese and white children's play at the Center. One may suspect that language contributes to the variance in choice of activities and rhetorical themes. However, the majority of the Chinese children spoke English fluently when they joined the Center.

Did the Chinese children in fact not engage in group play with the White children because the rules of the game did not assimilate nor accommodate well into their existing personal and media-related experience? When the time came to choose amongst available characters from the American media for a game, who were they supposed to be? While their peers could be *Superman* and *Jasmine*, the Chinese children had no human role models and were left with animal characters, such as *Rajah*, the tiger. They could not even be a heroine's twin sister, possibly because their hair did not have the correct color.

This phenomenon reinforces Piaget's (1952) theory that pre-operational children are perceptually bounded when they process a televised program. Visual and audio information is the focus of their cognitive capacity. It, therefore, underlines the importance of having diverse ethnic characters on television and video in a multicultural society, in order to encourage integration and interaction amongst children in the playground.

It would furthermore avoid any possible negative influences upon children who have to curtail their natural passion for superheroes and identify themselves only with non-human characters, as observed in Chinese children's play at the Center. As Kostelnik (1986) stated, children fulfill their needs for identification and self-esteem by pretending to be powerful characters in their imaginative play. Even though the Chinese children did engage in superhero play at home, they spent eight hours a day at the Center, without the option to express and fulfill their needs for identification and self-esteem. What are the consequences on the development of self concept and ethnic identity when children spend the majority of their formative hours in playgrounds without a perception of self?

Moreover, the Chinese children clearly picked up the act of fighting, actions frequently displayed in American children's television. Perhaps, because they did not have a super character within the dominant media culture with whom to identify or into whom they can transform, there was no point playing out such a theme as good versus evil. This may explain why a Chinese boy wanted to destroy me with a bomb even though he liked me very much. It may also shed light on why two Chinese boys used action sequences from *Batman* when they transformed into Chinese superheroes. Kostelnik (1986) stressed the value of superhero play on children's development of moral judgement. What is the potential impact on children, if they consistently process only action sequences, ignoring the associated characters and the pertinent "good conquers evil" theme when viewing a televised program?

When the Chinese children couldn't draw from the American media as a socialization agent, other agents came to the fore. Family is a very strong element in Chinese culture and this was reflected repeatedly in the stories these children told. While one might argue children are better off without the influence of media, media can also broaden our horizon by taking us beyond our immediate environment. As a result of this reduced socialization role of American media for Chinese American children, they may develop a narrower world view than their counterparts, as already revealed in their negative, ethnocentric perceptions of others.

As the American media apparatus continues to immortalize many white characters, it also perpetuates the status quo of the predominant media culture, which is devoid of positive Chinese images. Though in their own media repertoire, Chinese children have characters they could relate to, these stories and characters are totally unknown to other children. Therefore, there is no common ground in the playground for ethnic majority and minority children to interact and integrate in their group transformation play.

Group play in essence is a form of social behavior through which children learn to cooperate and interact with others (Corsaro, 1992). In a world endowed with meaning, children learn and grow through sharing their own developmental experiences with playmates and adults and through their interactive responses to the environment. However, the Chinese children in this study displayed only non-interactive responses to the US media environment. The role of American TV and video in the Chinese children's culture of play is minimal.

Consequently, the unicultural nature of American TV and video prevents the creation of a common peer culture from all children. At the Center, there were two types of peer cultures, the

white and the non-white. Through the lens of their play, White characters did not exist in Chinese children's world. By the same token, a Chinese super character was out of consideration in white children's kingdom of play. This segregation could also be disadvantageous to the white children, considering how diverse the American society would become when they grow up.

Almost half a century after the civil rights movement in the United States, children are still segregated in the playground by an invisible force. Through the use of media information in their play, children unknowingly continue the long undesirable American segregation legacy. Granted, the American media industry is set up to be a profit entity, not an educational institution. However, in this postmodern information age, media, especially television and video, cannot escape their function as a socialization agent for our young.

The advent of the digital age promises to add hundreds of TV channels to our media landscape. More and more re-runs with dated concepts and characters will be appearing on our TV screens. However, optimistically, this could actually be the greatest opportunity for the industry to be creative and to retune its programming strategies. Instead of depending primarily on re-runs, importing material from other cultures should be considered. This alternative would not only broaden viewers' horizon, but also fit within the industry's bottom-line philosophy. Social responsibilities and profit generation need not be mutually exclusive. Moreover, when producing new children's programs and movies, look to the abundant resources and ideas of a multicultural society, rather than rely on old tales that reflect Western societies and values centuries ago.

Parents could also help overcome this deficit in media culture by thoughtfully selecting TV programs for their children to watch and through their choice of video tapes. If child consumers are not viewing and purchasing socially obsolete programs, the industry would have to update its tactics in order to improve its profit margin.

Educational institutions need to modernize themselves as well. It is critical that media educators renew their curricula in light of the dramatic change in social and technological landscapes. For example, some educators have argued that industry structure is neglected in many media curricula in the US and students are ill prepared to be tomorrow's electronic media professionals (Brown, 1998; Priest, 1998). Lewis and Jhally (1998) concurred the point and advocated the examination of the changing media structures and strategies be included in media literacy courses. They stated, "[A]n analysis of the structure of media institutions is particularly important if Americans are able to appreciate and argue for

alternatives to a lightly regulated commercial media system" (p.109). Furthermore, du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) emphasized that patterns of consumption, regulation and production must be incorporated in media education in order for our students to fully understand the media.

Furthermore, media educators need to be sensitive to the needs of a multicultural society, just as they often call on the industry to do so. In reforming the curricula, educators should also look into other multicultural societies for inspirations. For instance, University of Wollongong, Australia, offers a new program, *Graduate Certificate in Multicultural Journalism*. The program accents cross-cultural literacy and awareness in media presentation, training current and future journalists to develop a "culturally and linguistically diverse approach to their profession" (White & Blackall, 1997:128). Media educators in the States could develop similar programs to socialize their current and future media professionals to be thoughtful and critical operators within the multicultural reality of contemporary American society.

As we march into the 21st century, it is predicted that in America (as well as many industrialized countries) children will spend longer hours at day care centers, the society will become increasingly diverse and our access to media will continue to expand. It is time for the media industry and the related socialization agents to help children reclaim their lost playground.

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